

*Gender Differences in Spoken Japanese and English*


**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Isabel Serrano', written in a cursive style.

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## Abstract

This paper presents data collected on the differences between the ways in which men and women speak in both Japanese and English, differences in the conversational strategies adopted by both genders, and differences in how boys and girls are raised and treated throughout their lives. The data are examined and discussed in relation to each other and in their implications for society as a whole. In the end it is concluded that gender differences do exist in both Japanese and English, but that they are not nearly as pervasive as is often assumed.

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## Introduction

What are the so-called men's and women's languages and how prevalent are they in the world today? Differences in the ways men and women speak have been noted and studied in a variety of languages. However, the true extent of the differences is still a subject of much debate among scholars. Some believe that the differences are widespread and deeply embedded in the ways in which we communicate. Among those who believe that exists a range of views on such gendered language, from it being a result of systematic oppression of women to it being evidence that men and women are essentially different. Others believe that gendered language exists only in the perceptions of native speakers of a language and that in fact, men and women have many more commonalities in the way they speak than they have differences.

In order to explore this range of views, this paper will investigate gender and language in Japanese and English in four parts. The first part will focus on observed and perceived differences in spoken Japanese. This will include a look at particle usage, honorific usage, and general speech patterns, such as interruption. It will be primarily fact-based, with the intention of bringing collected data to the fore.

The second part will focus on differences in spoken English. It will begin by looking at phonetic differences between men and women and then go on to look at vocabulary differences, specifically through the lens of a study on terms of address as employed by the different sexes in relation to the hearer's sex. Like the first part, this section's main point will be to foreground data collected by other researchers.

After a quantitative analysis has occurred in the first two parts, the third part will take a look at observed differences in conversational strategy that appears to occur in both languages or does not have any apparent connection to the spoken language itself. It will look at the ways in

which men dominate or attempt to dominate conversations and the ways in which women try to keep the flow of the conversation as smooth as possible. It will also discuss similarities in the way men and women talk, particularly in the use of indirectness.

Finally, the fourth part will suggest possible reasons for the observed phenomena discussed in this paper with a particular focus on the linguistic environment in which children are reared. It will also discuss the nature of the very study of gendered language itself and muse on the extent of gendered phonological variations around the world. While parts three and four will not be as focused on the data alone as the first two parts, most of the claims made there will be supported by evidence or will otherwise be acknowledged as being unsupported.

In the end, I reach the conclusion that gendered language exists and it exists in many different forms, but that it is a relatively insignificant aspect of everyday language use. In most cases, the differences between the ways in which the genders speak are very small with a great deal more overlap than is sometimes believed. Additionally, even when the differences pervade our society, they are not usually great enough to be noticeable. Altogether, the literature suggests that gendered language may be nothing more than a symptom of a gender-divisive society, rather than a powerful linguistic phenomenon in itself.

One important point to keep in mind while reading this paper is that, due to quotes and citations from a variety of sources, terms are not always consistent. Despite the fact that they are not equivalent, the words *sex* and *gender* will be used interchangeably. Additionally, gender will be treated as a system of binary categories. *Men* and *women* will be used to mean persons who are both biologically male and female respectively and who identify themselves as such. While this is somewhat anti-progressive, due to the fact that language use is as of now poorly understood in relation to many other fields of science, study of gendered language is so



unadvanced that it needs to be kept simple, and keeping sex and gender confined to their traditional roles is necessary. Perhaps once this field is somewhat more advanced, studies of how language affects those people who do not fit into the traditionally ascribed categories will be able to fit more easily with studies such as this one, but for now, it lies outside the scope of this paper.

### Gender Differences in Spoken Japanese

There has been a great deal of discussion and data on gender differences in spoken Japanese. They focus primarily on three things: particle usage, honorifics and politeness, and vocabulary. Gendered particle usage may actually exist in English as well, but the difference seems much more commonly cited in Japanese, perhaps because it is so widely understood to be a salient part of the language that it is even taught in Japanese as a foreign language classes. Honorifics and politeness are even more frequently claimed to be part of so-called women's language. Politeness being closely associated with femininity is common around the world, but it takes a unique form in Japanese, due to the language's system of plain, polite, honorific, and humiliating forms. Finally, vocabulary is a part of language much more frequently said to exhibit gender differences in Japanese than in English. However, this paper will look mostly at the case of one particular word which is in fact used by both men and women, which will make for an easier cross-language comparison.

First let us take a look at differences in particle usage between Japanese men and women. Particles resemble English prepositions in many ways, though they occur in the post position. However, particles can serve many functions that English prepositions cannot, particularly the expressing of the speaker's attitude toward the subject. Naturally, it is here where many of the alleged differences can be found. These particles occur at the end of sentences and are believed

to indicate, among other things, gender (Streetharan, 2004 85). Women in particular use sentence-final particles (SFPs) as one of their tools to indicate “gender, class, social status, upbringing, verbal acts (such as sarcasm or anger), and power” (Streetharan 85-86). In other words, there are particles that are considered feminine, particles that are considered masculine, and particles that are considered neutral (Streetharan 90). However, the perceptions of native speakers of Japanese on how and when these particles are used are a little less clear-cut. For example, many people claim that neither they nor anyone else they know uses so-called men’s language (Streetharan 82). On the other hand, there are also reports from native speakers that masculine speech is “consistent across ages, occupations, reasons, and situations” (Streetharan 100), which suggests that if masculine language does exist, it is used consistently by men. So, is it true then that there exists gender differences in particle usage in Japanese? Before we take a closer look at some data, let us look at which particles are considered to be gendered.

Siegal and Okamoto (2003) looked at a number of textbooks commonly used in the United States to teach Japanese as a foreign language and found that the following sentence-final forms are taught as being masculine or feminine, respectively. Male sentence-final forms are said to be *(n)da*, *da yo*, *da ne*, *da yo ne*, *ne* following the plain form of a verb (as opposed to the polite form), *yo*, *ze*, *zo*, *ka*, *kai*, *kana*, *(y)oo(yo)*, and the plain form of the verb alone. Female sentence final forms are *wa*, *wa yo*, *da wa (yo)*, *wa ne*, *wa yo ne*, *kashira*, *no*, *na no*, *na no yo*, *yo* following a noun or a na-adjective, and *mashou yo* (52). *Zo* in particular is reported to be used exclusively by men. It indicates insistence, authority, aggressiveness, and higher status (Streetharan 85). *Ze*, which represents a close relationship, is also reported to be used exclusively by men (Streetharan 85). These are the most masculine particles (Streetharan 90). On the other end of the spectrum is *yo* when it is used directly following a noun with no verb in between. This

is the most stereotypically feminine particle (Streetharan 89). Additionally, Okada (2006) found asking questions with no particle at all at the end (formal Japanese requires the particle *ka* to end each question) to be a feature of feminine language. (Though Okada insists that it was not the speakers' genders themselves that resulted in the difference, but rather the different activities the speakers were engaged in, the data does not necessarily support that claim, and there is no comparison done between men and women working in similar conditions in order to prove Okada's suggestion.)

A quantitative analysis of the data shows that in Streetharan's study, *zo* was used only by the youngest men (Streetharan 89-92), students either 19 or 23 years old (88). The salarymen (middle-class and, in this case, middle-aged businessmen are commonly called *salarymen* or *sarariiman* in Japan) and retired or semi-retired seniors who were also observed in this study neglected *zo* and *ze* altogether. On the whole, Streetharan found that the most commonly used SFPs were *na*, *ne*, and *nen/ten*, which are gender neutral and were in fact used with a vastly greater frequency than any gendered particles (88-90). Okada found that women used repair non-particle questions (asking for confirmation of what was just said) 4.6 times more than men did in meetings among students of a university orchestra (350). Additionally, Siegal and Okamoto report that young women and women who speak a regional dialect do not use *wa*, *wa yo*, *da wa* (*yo*), *wa ne*, *wa yo ne*, *kashira*, or *yo* after a noun or na-adjective and instead use the supposedly more masculine (*n*)*da*, *da yo*, *da ne*, *da yo ne*, *ne* following the plain form of a verb or adjective, *yo*, *kana*, (*y*)*oo*(*yo*), and the plain form of the verb alone (53). Men use *no* and *na no*, and use *kai*, *dai*, *zo*, and *ze* only in certain situations (Siegal and Okamoto 54).

It would seem particle usage does vary by gender, with some forms restricted to either men or women, but these restrictions are not nearly as great as is often claimed and most

speakers will choose to use gender-neutral particles most of the time. Streetharan concluded that “men do not necessarily use the speech styles that they are stereotypically assumed to use” (84-85). However, honorifics and politeness are often claimed even more strongly to be indicative of gendered speech in Japan. Let us begin with a quick explanation of the Japanese system of linguistic politeness before going on to examine the perceptions of honorific use and the realities of data collected.

Japanese has four basic forms: plain, polite, honorific, and humiliating or humble. Plain form, also called dictionary form, is the basic form of the language and is usually used in informal situations. Polite form is used in situations where one addresses a stranger of approximately equal social rank or someone of higher rank in some way, such as a student to a teacher. Honorific form is used when speaking to or about persons much higher in rank, such as a sales clerk to a customer (business transactions require the highest level of politeness possible in Japan). Humiliative forms are used to refer to one’s own actions in to people of much higher rank. Each form has its own suffixes and sometimes prefixes, making it a much more complex and involved system than most languages have. How this rich system of honorifics is employed in any given situation depends on a variety of factors, but one of them appears to be gender.

A study done in Tokyo found that sex was more important than age or education in determining politeness of speech (Shibamoto, 1987 271). Martin has even gone so far as to say that “one’s sex is the most important social factor in determining one’s honorific usage” (qtd. in Kramer, 1975 207, emphasis in original). As Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010) put it, “As in many other languages, Japanese men’s language is conventionally rough, assertive, and direct, whereas women’s language is conventionally polite, emotional, and indirect” (69). There is evidence in studies from the early 1970s done in Okazaki, Aichi-ken “that female speech is more

polite than male speech” (Shibamoto 270). A nation-wide study from the 1950s found that women used honorifics more frequently in all contexts, but men used a wider range of honorifics and showed more awareness of the hearer’s identity and social position (Shibamoto 270). A study done in Sapporo in 1978 found that women, the elderly, and those from Kantô used the widest range of honorifics, “women used the most humiliating forms,” and men only take hierarchy into account in using honorifics while women also respond to familiarity (Shibamoto 270). Smith (1992) states that “it would appear that women are the only users of honorific verbal morphology when issuing directives from a position of authority,” based on watching two instructional programs on television, one hosted by and presumably aimed towards men and the other by and for women (74). By 1983 it was observed that use of honorifics in rural areas was decreasing due to the breakdown of the pre-war household ranking system, but this was especially true among young men (Shibamoto 270). Furthermore, women “use more polite [...] predicates than men in same-sex, informal conversations” (Smith 67). Additionally, while these studies may potentially seem outdated today, there are still many materials teaching women to speak more politely, which includes instructions on using honorifics, on sale in Japan (Siegal and Okamoto 55). Indeed, Smith’s study of the use of directives in anime found that when commands were grouped by type (that is, imperatives versus requests and desideratives), female anime characters tended to use the most polite forms available, while male characters used the least polite forms available (68-71).

All these data taken together seem a little overwhelming, but they all have one thing in common – they all support the claim that women are more polite than men in Japan. However, as with particle usage, it is not easy to make a statement dividing men’s and women’s language that is unquestionably true. Despite the evidence that women are *more* polite, there are studies

finding that more often than not, men in Japan are paragons of politeness as well. For example, according to Streetharan, “it seems [salarymen] avoid using rough, vulgar forms, preferring to sound neutral and non-threatening – at least in informal, friendly conversations” (102). Older men, especially those whose careers or former careers involved leading subordinates also used politer language (Streetharan 102). Although one can perhaps rate women on a hypothetical politeness scale as being more polite than men, the use of polite forms and strategies by Japanese men and women represents anything but two clear-cut, mutually exclusive categories.

In the use of both particles and politeness, we have seen that the data often support the stereotypes, but only to a certain extent. In both cases there appears to be more overlap between men and women than there are discrete categories for men’s and women’s language. Vocabulary is one more area where there is said to be a gender division in Japanese. Let us again look at some data.

It has been said that, in terms of vocabulary, men “use a smaller and less emotionally charged lexicon” (Streetharan 84). One generalized example is that men use *kango* (words derived from Chinese) more than women in formal contexts (Shibamoto 274). Since these words are often technical in nature, it supports the claim that men’s vocabularies are “less emotionally charged,” and, like the example of honorifics above, it also contradicts the perception of many native speakers that language use varies by sex only in informal contexts (Shibamoto 274). An example of the difference in more informal contexts, though, is the use of the word *kawaii*, which means “cute.” Girls age 2-5 in preschool in Japan were found in a study by Burdelski and Mitsuhashi to be 3-9 times more likely to describe themselves with the word *kawaii* than boys are (68, 70). Additionally, 25 out of the 26 descriptions of personal items by the children as *kawaii* in this study were expressed by girls (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 82-83). Differences in

informal contexts is not something children grow out of. There are also gender stereotypes associated with different pronouns in Japan, and Streetharan found that the youngest male speakers in her study (age 19 or 23) also used the most stereotypically masculine pronouns (and clause-level politeness structures) with the greatest frequency (92). Even though no women were observed in this study in order to make a comparison, these are the same young men who exhibited the only instances of usage of the most masculine particles, which suggests that these pronouns also convey masculinity which would not likely be found in women's speech. And it does not end even with something as fundamental as pronouns. Even on what could perhaps be seen as the most basic level of human speech of all, a simple response in the affirmative, textbooks teach that women use *ee* while men use *un* or *aa* in informal contexts (Siegal and Okamoto 55).

What we have seen is that there is indeed some evidence that men and women use different words to express themselves. However, the important thing to remember with vocabulary differences between men and women is that, while they may exist, the majority of the language is still gender-neutral. The vast majority of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and every other part of speech, is used and understood equally by men and women. Even in cases where the usage is not equal, it may be a question of frequency of use rather than a question of gender exclusivity. For example, boys still use *kawaii*; women still answer *un* (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 82-3; Siegal and Okamoto 56).

Having looked at particle usage, honorific and polite speech usage, and vocabulary differences between men and women, it seems we can now say that the use of gendered language in Japanese unquestionably exists, but it would appear to be much more subtle and to appear



much less frequently than is often supposed. The situation in English is similar in principle, but certainly not in the specifics.

### Gender Differences in Spoken English

English is a relatively gender-neutral language compared to many of its closest relatives. At the very least, it does not have grammatical gender, which one would imagine would remove the very possibility of many of the complications gendered language can cause modern society, such as the debate among French speakers about whether women holding traditionally male jobs should be referred to by the grammatically masculine job title or whether a new, grammatically feminine form of the word should be created, but English is not without its share of similar controversy in the form of debate over words such as “businessman” vs. “businessperson” or the long-standing debate regarding so-called “singular *they*.” And besides such obvious and politically charged topics, English also contains a great deal of gender-specific language use, ranging from differences on the phonetic level to differences in vocabulary.

One area in which men and women differ in English is in their pronunciation. In addition to his own study using the speech of DJs on American radio, Heffernan (2010) cites a wide range of other studies that consistently found gender differences in a range of sounds in a variety of regions. What all the cited research has in common, too, is that men spoke less clearly, using more assimilation and lenition (or in other words, changing sounds to make them more like nearby sounds and weakening sounds respectively), in every case (67). For example, males tend to reduce vowels more, bringing them closer to a schwa (69). Furthermore, “women produce sharper temporal distinctions between the voiceless and the voiced categories” of consonants in African-American English and British English (as well as German) (69). He goes on to say that

men more often tend to produce neutralized variants, such as /θ/ and /ð/ becoming /t/ and /d/ respectively in New York City English; /θ/ becoming /f/ in Newfoundland, Australian, and British English; and /ɹ/ becoming /w/ in Canadian, New Zealand, and Scottish English (70). Men “also tend to assimilate, lenite, and delete consonants more,” as in the deletion of word-final /t/ and /d/ in American and African-American English; the assimilation and/or deletion of word-medial /t/ and /d/ in American, Canadian, and Australian English; the lenition of word-medial /t/ and /d/ in American English; deleting “word-initial /h/ to the following segment in American English;” reduction or omission of *the* in York English; and palatalization of alveolar obstruents before /j/ in Australian English (for example, *Tuesday* going from standard /tjuzdei/ to [tʃəuzdei]) (70). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet cite two studies which both found differences in vowel pronunciation based on both gender and socio-economic status. One was Labov’s 1990 Philadelphia study on fronting of (ae) and (aw), which found that women at the bottom and top of the social/employment hierarchy were more vernacular and more standard respectively (195). The second was a study by Eckert in 1989 and 1999 which looked at the backing of (uh) and the raising of the nucleus of (ay) in jocks (middle-class high school students) and burnouts (working-class high school students) in the Detroit suburbs and which produced the same results as Labov’s study (195-196). Kiesling (2005) found in his study of male university students in a fraternity in Virginia that there was a pervasive use of “-in” in place of the standard “-ing” (721).

This evidence shows that there is a marked phonetic difference in the way men and women speak in English. However, this phenomenon may not be immediately obvious to every native speaker. A gender difference that is much more outstanding is that of vocabulary.

One particular difference between male and female speakers of English that has been observed and studied is in the terms of address men and women use with each other. Men use “a

proportionately greater variety of forms of address for women and for men, while women used fewer” (Kramer 201). For example, men can use *honey* and *baby* for women, but women cannot reciprocate; doing so would mark their language. Women may call other women *honey* (Kramer 201-202), but this is still only half as many terms as men are able to use in the same context. In Kramer’s experiment, male and female university students in Illinois were sent out to collect terms of address. Women received three different terms of address from female salespersons (*dear*, *ma’am*, and *miss*) and eleven from male salespersons (*señorita*, *ma’am*, *lady*, *kiddo*, *young lady*, *sweetie*, *little lady*, *miss*, *dear*, *lovey*, and *baby*) Men were called *sir* and *dear* by female salespersons and *sir* alone by male salespersons (203). While it is obvious that the sex of the hearer is also a major determining factor in which terms of address were chosen by speakers, it is also clear that the sex of the speaker has almost as big of an impact on word choice in this particular situation. In another part of her experiment, Kramer examined popular novels and short stories and found that within them, men were more likely to command attention with address forms (206). In other words, not only do men have a greater repertoire to choose from in the context of addressing another person, but they are also freer to use address terms at all.

These are only a few examples of gender differences in spoken English. Clearly, they are less noticeable, for the most part, than their Japanese counterparts, since many of the Japanese differences involve the use of completely different words by men and women. However, in neither language are the differences always apparent to native speakers and, more importantly, in every case there is considerable overlap. In no case so far observed have men and women spoken completely differently from each other, which is an important point of commonality. Another case where both languages have something in common is in the difference in conversational strategies men and women take.

### Non-Language-Specific Differences in Conversational Style

Men and women speak differently from each other. This is true not only in terms of pronunciation and word choice, but in the more general roles they adopt in the conversations as well. While this is not a gender difference that can be easily quantified, at least not as easily as words spoken with different frequencies can be counted, it is an important part of mixed-sex discourse and it appears to occur with surprising frequency across languages.

One interesting aspect of differences in conversational style is that even scientific, statistical analysis yields results very similar to what one would expect based on stereotypes and anecdotal evidence (which, as we have seen and will see again, is not necessarily the case for all forms of language). We expect men to be more aggressive and we expect women to be friendlier, as evidenced by Saint-Jacques's (1973) claim that a Japanese male would never carry on complimenting the other and humbling the self the way a woman would (91-92). Though Saint-Jacques uses no specific, scientifically collected data to back up his claim, there actually is evidence to support this. Wetzel (1998) cites studies showing that men are more direct and challenging than women, while women aim for solidarity and agreement and are more interactional and collaborative (558). According to Itakura and Tsui (2004), women use language to make connections, while men use it to emphasize their status (225). In their study of eight mixed-sex pairs of Japanese university students, they found that the men were consistently self-oriented while the women were other-oriented (Itakura and Tsui 226). As they put it,

Males played a central role in shaping the development of the conversation; all the conversations evolved around the interests of the male speakers; and the female speakers were forced to play a subservient role and their contributions to

the conversation were trivialized. Such differences can hardly be explained away as mere differences in conversational style and in the orientation of people being brought up in difference subcultures. (Itakura and Tsui 245)

An example of this can be seen in the way men and women employed questions in their recorded conversations in this study. Women use questions to invite others to talk, to perpetuate the topic of discussion, and to avoid seeming like an expert (Itakura and Tsui 225). Men use questions to get information, show expertise, and change the subject (Itakura and Tsui 225). In Hirschman's (1994) study using four university students, it was found that "[s]everal of the female/male conversations fell into a question-answer pattern, with the females asking questions and the males answering, but not asking the females questions in return" (438). Similarly, she found:

On the average, the two females use a greater percentage of "personal" references (*we, you, and I ...*) than do the males. This correlated with the subjective impression from the conversations that the females tend to talk more about their own experiences and feelings, while the males tend to generalize and talk rather abstractly. In particular, the pronouns involving the other speaker ... occur at a higher frequency for the females than the 3rd person references ... but this frequency is strikingly reversed for the males .... Certainly, this use of pronouns gives quite a different tone to the females' conversational style than to the males'. (Hirschman 434)

Additionally, "[w]omen are more likely than men to ... demand or encourage responses from their fellow speakers" (Wetzel 557). This is seen in how both American and Japanese women use minimal responses more than men, to the point where they were found to be used almost exclusively by women in one study, and mostly in conversation with other women (Hirschman

437; Streetharan 84; Wetzel 557), which is another way of facilitating the flow of conversation. Minimal responses, such as *uh-huh* or *mm-hm* are used to at least acknowledge that the user has heard the speaker and sometimes even to align themselves or agree with the other person, thus encouraging the speaker to continue the same topic or story. In Hirschman's study, she found that while the men tended to argue, the women often built on what the previous speaker had said (438). Indeed, women often try to avoid an abrupt change of topic in order to keep the flow of the conversation smooth (Wetzel 558). They also use more fillers than men (Hirschman 432), which is another way of keeping the conversation from stalling while the speaker is trying to find the appropriate words. These conversational strategies are even self-perpetuating, as the differences cause a "sexual division in labor in conversation" (Uchida, 1992 550). In other words, because men expect women to maintain the conversational flow, they make no effort to, and because men make no effort to, women are forced to pick up the slack, giving rise to the consistent pattern described above. Most of these data are really just comparative descriptions, but there are actual statistics with specific numbers that support some of these claims about men and women too. For example, in reference to the question of whether men are more aggressive and self-oriented than women, there is one study that found that men did 98% of the interrupting during the course of their experiment (Itakura and Tsui 224), showing that men were clearly the ones dominating the exchanges, even without the qualitative analysis done by the authors. Additionally, Hirschman found that "more time is used for talking with a female present," suggesting that "females may play a role in facilitating the flow of conversation (431). Even though the more specific data are a little more lacking than the comparisons, the two do not disagree with each other, and taken together, they paint a clear picture of respective male and female conversational patterns.

Within these patterns, it is obvious that men dominate women in conversation. But that yet leaves the question of what that means. Does it mean women are socially powerless? Or is it a case of being “different but equal?” Many people see this male dominance as proof that women’s language is not only feminine but inferior or powerless (Smith 59). This is a very contentious issue and we are certainly far from a consensus on it, but Smith makes a very good point when she says that traditionally, in Japan, families had a strict hierarchy, so that women spoke up to their husbands (59). Wetzel also makes a strong case for it when she says that in the West, so-called women’s language has been found to be a marker of powerlessness, not gender, with low-class men more likely to use it than professional, well-educated, middle-class women (560). Kramer further found in her study on address terms that it was the “women and young males, those with relatively low social status, who were most concerned with what terms of address are, or should be, used” (204). In an even more extreme case, because women are much less respected than men, politeness may be a mark of women’s social powerlessness in that it is a defense strategy, a way for women to avoid being criticized, or even physically abused (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 193; Uchida 558-559).

However, some people believe that, because more polite language is more closely associated with women, people who use it may not be expressing powerlessness or even politeness exactly, but rather femininity alone (Smith 59-60). For example, in Smith’s study using the two how-to programs on Japanese television, she hypothesizes that it may be that the cooking instructor was more polite than the home repairman because cooking is generally considered to be a feminine pursuit. She therefore may have been seeking solidarity with her presumably female target audience, not attempting to be more humble, when she used more



polite language (Smith 75). The opposite may also be true. That is to say, people who sound feminine may instead want to sound polite. As Streetharan wrote,

it is clear from Inoue and Okamoto's work that using feminine SFPs in standard Japanese can index, or point to, good upbringing, higher education, and higher class. Since women are associated with politeness, men using more traditionally feminine SFP forms may be targeting a polite image, not a feminine one. (102)

In a way, being feminine and being polite are inexorably intertwined due to women's history in society. Traditionally, women were relegated to certain jobs, such as teachers or secretaries, which are jobs requiring standard language use and frequent interaction with strangers, which most people would expect to be handled in a polite manner. The typically gender-specific jobs men have, on the other hand, are positions such as factory or construction workers. These jobs usually entail interaction only among a set group of people, namely one's co-workers, and so are more likely to spawn usage of less-standard and less-polite language in speakers' attempts to garner covert prestige (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 194).

Complicating the whole issue even further is the fact that some people say that, despite the large body of evidence supporting the claims, the idea that women or men all speak in a certain way is so far from the truth that it is impossible to generalize about men's or women's speech. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet make the following argument:

With a focus on sex difference, both sociolinguists and casual commentators have emerged with content-based generalizations: Women are more conservative, more polite, more cooperative, or more egalitarian than men. But given that such generalizations almost never apply across the board in any community, and can be refuted on a grand scale in some communities of practice, we have two choices: to

proclaim exceptions on no principled basis, or to look for quite different kinds of generalizations. (191)

Indeed, there is some irrefutable evidence for similarities between women's and men's language. For example, both women and men have been described as being indirect in what they say. In women's case, it was claimed to be a strategy to soften potentially confrontational accusations (Wetzel 558); in men, it has been found to express what Kiesling calls "homosocial desire" (the desire for a same-sex friendship, differentiated from homosexual desire) (696). Even though the exact context in which indirectness is used appears to differ between men and women, it could be argued that essentially, both are using it for the same thing: in order to develop closer social bonds. In fact, while it seems to be often claimed that women are more indirect (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 69) and that "women tend to use more hedges, qualifiers, empty adjectives, polite forms, and so forth, conveying their unassertiveness" (Lakoff qtd. in Uchida 549), implying that indirectness is a feature of women's speech only, Kiesling has found a number of situations in which men may use indirectness in their everyday, informal communications in his single study performed in a university fraternity house. For example, he found young men using insults to promote competition, rather than to actually offend the hearer. Competition would then promote solidarity, as the young men would have common ground in striving for the same goal. This is indirectness, because no man actually says that he wants to compete with his friends, nor does he express that he wants to spend time with his friends in order to become closer (Kiesling 721-722). Kiesling adds that men bond through taking a "cool" stance in order not to appear "too earnest" in their desire to form friendships with each other, which includes pervasive use of the word *dude* (721). This is essentially an extension of the earlier point; the men express their homosocial desire indirectly through a façade of social distance, even though their goal is to develop social

intimacy. Kiesling also cites another study in which young men were found to be gossiping about other men whom they believed to be homosexual. By talking about *other* men being homosexual, men can imply (or in other words, express indirectly) that homosexuality belongs outside their group (Kiesling 699-700). This is yet another way in which men can communicate an important concept without stating it explicitly, as one would expect based on much of the literature on men's language.

These studies on the different conversational styles adopted by men and women seem to suggest that, just like in the cases of grammatical and lexical differences in both Japanese and English, there are indeed differences in the very manner in which the two genders speak to each other, but there are also similarities that are often underplayed. As with the previous two sections, this one found there to be a great deal of overlap and no clear boundaries, distinctions, or mutual exclusions between the two conversational styles.

### Other Aspects of Gender and Language and Discussion

We have seen that there are differences in the ways men and women speak. Some of these differences are language-specific, like certain words or forms being used more frequently or exclusively by one sex. Many of the differences, however, have a counterpart in other languages; many of the phenomena just occur generally, regardless of what language is actually being spoken. So why is that the case? Why do men and women speak differently, and why is that common across the world?

One possible reason that it is important to consider is that boys and girls are raised differently. Even in the most progressive of societies, there remain pervasive stereotypes about how men and women should behave, what they should like, and what it is acceptable for them to

do with their lives. In other words, children are treated differently based on what sex organs they are born with. For example, preschool teachers in Japan encourage bravery in boys and peacemaking in girls, allowing boys to fight but forcing girls to intervene (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 69).

And it is not only what behavior gets scolded that differs between how boys and girls are treated; the language used with them is an important part of this different treatment too. As Burdelski and Mitsuhashi put it, “Children are socialized through language into affect and gender” (69). In Japanese, mothers speak to their children using the pronouns and particles normally associated with whichever sex the child is, rather than with the speech style normally expected from young or middle-aged women (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 69). Manners are forced almost exclusively on girls and this includes modest speech (Smith 61-62). Girls are also taught to try harder than boys to engage the opposite sex in conversation (Uchida 560). This means that mothers are blatantly teaching their children to act differently from one another, helping to solidify gender division in both society and language. And again, the teachers play a big role in perpetuating this tradition as well. For example, in Burdelski and Mitsuhashi’s study, they found that the word *kawaii* is associated with girls, while the word *kakkoi* “cool” is associated with boys (73-76). This is not simply a case of abstract attitude, though. Differences in how the children were spoken to were quantifiably observed in this study. During the course of the classroom observations, teachers described personal items (such as a toy or lunchbox brought in from home) as *kawaii* 77 times. Of those 77 times, 64 were for girls and only 11 were for boys, with the remaining two being for both (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 71). Furthermore, the teachers also encouraged the boys to think of the girls as *kawaii* (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 87). Similarly, during the course of the observation, teachers used *kakkoi* to describe personal items 60 times:

47 for boys and 11 for girls (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 75). This difference in treatment can have a huge impact on the children's attitudes and behavior later in life, since at this age the children do not really understand and cannot form their own original concepts or descriptions of things very often. In many of the excerpts Burdelski and Mitsuhashi gave of their data, the teachers would speak to the children almost as though it were a conversation between equals, asking the child what something was or what they thought about something. When the child failed to answer, the teacher would interpret the item or even the child's own behavior and describe it for them. This is of course an important part of teaching children how to speak and express themselves to others; but because of the difference in the behaviors encouraged and in the words used to and about children of different sexes, *kawaii*, which due to its definition of being something not only cute but something that requires care and looking after is strongly tied to empathy and relationships, and *kakkoii* both become an important part of gender identity for the children (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 86-87).

The interconnection of language and gender continues into adolescence as well. In particular, gender seems to be connected in some way to attitudes about foreign language. A study in 1998 showed that more females than males in the United States wanted to learn Asian languages (Kobayashi, 2002 182). Kobayashi's own study, which surveyed Japanese high school students about their attitudes toward English and learning it as a foreign language, then went on to find that females valued English more highly than males (185-187). Even when they move on to university study, English is widely considered socially acceptable and remains a popular choice of major for women in Japan (Kobayashi 188). The claims about the attitudes towards English learning are further borne out by statistics that say that more women visit the United States from Japan in their twenties, but by their thirties, more men than women are coming



(Kobayashi 192). This suggests that Japanese women are coming to the United States in order to study abroad, while men are almost certainly coming on business trips.

So what does gender have to do with learning a foreign language? How do gender, society, and language interact in this case? Kobayashi cites several other articles which suggest that many young Japanese women take employment at foreign companies and idealize study abroad because they are marginalized in Japan (191). I hypothesize that the same thing applies to female students in America, despite our relatively greater opportunities than our Japanese counterparts. When I was preparing to study abroad myself, I was told by the study abroad advisor that women made up a clear majority of American students studying abroad. This surprised me; after all, there does not seem to be anything obviously feminine about travel. I could not recall ever hearing a single thing from a foreign language teacher at the university level that seemed to encourage study abroad on the basis of a stereotypically feminine trait, and even when I remembered my high school German teacher (an American woman who had done a year of study in Munich after graduating from university herself) telling us that we should go clothes shopping in Germany if we ever got the chance, I also reflected that she also gave us lessons on how currency exchange rates worked after she told us to go shopping and that indeed this was but one lesson in two years of taking classes with her. Every other time she taught us something in that class that was not part of our language training, it was something to do with the history, the geography, the food, or the holiday traditions of Germany. Not one of those subjects seems to be gendered in any way. So why do so many women from America as well as Japan desire to study abroad? I came to the conclusion that perhaps it was because even though women are officially equal to men in American society, in everyday interactions, women are often if not always treated as inferiors. Take for instance the studies on conversational dominance discussed

above. If women feel that their contributions to conversations are constantly trivialized, that they have to work much harder than men just to have an equal voice heard, and that men are not really interested in what they have to say, is it not possible that they would internalize these struggles and feel subconsciously that they need to escape to another society where they might be better heard? Would they not like to get away to a place where an aspect of their identity other than their gender (in this case, their nationality) becomes their most salient feature? This, of course, is only a hypothesis and would require a vast study to confirm or correct, but I do think it is worth pointing out that many female learners of Japanese in both America and Korea avoid using what they are taught is “women’s language” (Siegal and Okamoto 57-58). I think this is a clear sign that when women study foreign languages, they do so in an attempt to adopt a new identity that is not based on their gender.

These differences in the language we are raised in as children and in the language attitudes that seem to develop naturally as we age can result in some very interesting mistaken perceptions. For example, Dailey-O’Cain (2000) cites several studies and then conducts her own on the use of quotative *like*. In regards to gender, she found that it was used slightly more by men than by women, but that the variation was not statistically significant (Dailey-O’Cain 68). This is merely an addition to a great deal of study already done on quotative *like*, which found every result from it being used more by men to it being used equally by both men and women to it being used 83% of the time by women (Dailey-O’Cain 62-63). This shows that the reality is a bit muddled, but despite that, the studies on people’s perception of quotative *like* usage could not be clearer. People believe overwhelmingly that it is used more by women than by men (Dailey-O’Cain 62-63, 69). Why is that the case? It may be because quotative *like* is a hedge and hedges are seen to be more polite and characteristic of women’s language (Dailey-O’Cain 63). It may



also be that *like* is associated with stereotypically female traits like friendliness but seems to diminish stereotypically male traits like education, so people assume it would be used more by women (Dailey-O'Cain 76).

This calls into question the accuracy of much of what has come before in this paper. If perceptions can be so far off the mark, how do we know what is true enough to base studies on? In a way, we cannot know. Results, or at the very least, interpretation of those results will always be seen through the lens of the researchers' own preconceptions. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) point out that Labov's famous 1963 Martha's Vineyard study might have produced different results if he had focused his study on gender (191-192). He did not focus on gender, though, because his perception was not that gender was the deciding factor in this particular vowel shift. Perhaps (or even likely) it was not. We will never know that for certain, however, since the simple fact is that he did not study gender in that case. Indeed, contradictions abound in the literature on gendered language and one must wonder how many of these issues are based on preconceived misconceptions. For example, in a 2002 study of middle-class Japanese mothers, it was found that the women's speech was not all the same and that the women switched easily between "ideologically feminine and masculine" forms from moment to moment (Streetharan 83). This almost seems to contradict the very idea of men's and women's language itself. There may still be language stereotyped as being gendered, but how can gendered language exist in actuality if women are using both forms? It could be argued that if it is true that they are, then there is no women's language; if it is true that men used both forms as well, as Streetharan found, then there is no gendered language. There is only language. I would like to suggest that, based on the great deal of evidence presented in previous sections of this paper, gendered language does exist. These new data merely reconfirm that the perception of gendered language is that it is

much more prevalent than it actually is. For the most part, men and women speak the same language using the same words in the same way.

And yet strong stereotypes persevere. And not only are they as obvious as claiming intuitively that women are more polite, but indeed, some can be subconscious as well. In Heffernan's study of radio DJs, he used surveys to determine how people perceived the DJs based on their voices alone. He found that the ones who rated the most masculine were the ones with the most contracted vowel spaces (Heffernan 76). In fact, what he found was that lenition of the /θ/ in *with* and vowel duration throughout speech were both perceived to be linked to both masculinity and regional accents (Heffernan 79, 82-83). He believes that the two are intertwined, however, with regional accents from the southern United States being associated with masculinity due to the South's tradition of a conservative, male-dominated culture (Heffernan 83). This may be true, but it alone cannot explain that less-clear speech equates to masculinity. Even if it is not tied up in one particular region or language, it is clearly a social aspect of language, not a natural one, as the comparative size of the vocal tracts of men and women is not enough to account for the differences (Heffernan 69). And yet, women are known to enunciate their vowels more clearly in many different languages, including American English, British English, Canadian English, Creek, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Kunwinjku [an Australian Aboriginal language in the Arnhem family spoken in the Northern Territory], and Swedish (Heffernan 68-69). Furthermore, Streetharan cites a study finding that phonological reductions in Japanese, such as *dekee* for *dekai* "big," are associated with men as well (84). Is this then true gendered language? I believe that it is, but that like all the other cases examined here, it is not the most important part of the language. It is indeed pervasive, probably more so than any of the other phenomena discussed in this paper, and in fact, possibly even more extensive than is

known from present studies. (For example, Australian English is not included in this list, yet I have observed that the overly macho character Clive Pugh on the Australian comedy program *The Hamster Wheel* speaks with a very noticeable mumble; I can only conclude that Australian English should likely be included on the list. If that is true, then the list is not comprehensive and may potentially include most if not all languages.) However, I would like to point out that while we may internalize and subconsciously interpret phonetic differences in speech, because we are not consciously aware of them, they play a less important role in the interaction of gender, language, and society than words or word forms that are outright marked as being either feminine or masculine. I further add that they are less important than the conversation-encompassing framework that is conversational strategy, which dictates the entire form and direction the conversation will take. Phonetic differences between men and women indisputably exist, but if we were to notice them, then they too would get blown out of proportion like every other aspect of gendered language.

### Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, we have explored the gender differences in spoken Japanese, spoken English, conversational style, and in the linguistic environment in which children are raised. We have seen that in Japanese, particles are sometimes stereotyped as being either masculine or feminine and that the list of particles that are supposedly used by only one gender is actually quite extensive. We have also seen that women are widely believed to be more polite, and while the evidence supports this, it also shows that men are not as rude as they are seen to be. We looked at vocabulary differences and paid special attention to the word *kawaii* and found that among young children, there was a sharp contrast in the frequency with which the

word was used. Other supposed gender differences in vocabulary, however, were not borne out as strongly by the evidence.

We then looked at gender differences in spoken English. We first examined phonological differences and found that men consistently spoke less clearly than women. We then looked at the differences in the way men and women used terms of address for each other and again found a strong gender difference. However, like in Japanese, the truth here was not one which would necessarily appear obvious to native speakers and the difference was not so great as to represent true “men’s language” or “women’s language.”

After that, we moved on to examine differences in conversational styles between men and women. We presented a great deal of evidence suggesting that men dominate women in conversation. We explored this idea some more, discussing the two conflicting ideas that people expressing politeness may just happen to sound feminine because people expect women to be polite; or that people expressing femininity may just happen to sound polite because people expect women to be polite. In the face of the contradicting evidence, we were able to conclude only that there is certainly a form of “women’s language” in play here and that that language is self-perpetuating. However, we then looked at a case where a group of men particularly concerned with protecting their masculinity (Kiesling 705) used indirectness, a stereotypically female trait, to express many of their desires towards one another. This therefore proved that even when there seems to be a clear distinction between “men’s language” and “women’s language,” there may in fact be a lot of overlap.

Finally, we offered some possible explanations for why and how gendered language develops. Probable reasons include the simple fact that parents and teachers, even the ones with the best intentions, raise boys and girls differently and that women come to view language

differently because they feel oppressed in everyday life and are searching for an escape. We then went on to consider that, although our perception of language may affect how we use it to the extent that we may choose to study a foreign language, it does not in fact affect everything we do with it. As an example, we looked at the use of quotative *like*, which is always perceived to be feminine and to be used more by women than by men, but which seems to probably be used by both men and women with equal frequency. At last, we considered a case where there was no real evidence to contradict the existence of gendered language: the unusual pervasiveness of phonological differences between men and women. Again, we found that in fact, this difference was not clear cut, as the evidence only stated that men spoke *less clearly* than women, meaning that it was not a case of two distinct categories where men always mumbled and women always enunciated clearly. Instead, just like most of the other gender differences discussed in this paper, this was merely a case of frequency of use, rather than separate languages for men and women. Furthermore, we pointed out that because native speakers are not likely to be consciously aware of phonological changes, any perceptions they have of the masculinity of mumbling is probably subconscious and is therefore less striking and affects society to a lesser degree than any difference which would be apparently obvious to the average native speaker.

After all the articles with all their data were examined, we came to the conclusion that there are many perceived differences in men's and women's speech in both Japanese and English, but the extent to which they actually exist is not as great as we might think. For some reason, it seems to be a common practice that we perceive gender differences to be much more common than they really are. I believe that the reason for this is that people use gender differences to explain some of the rich variety that exists in every spoken language, thus causing native speakers to perceive greater differences than those that actually exist. Additionally, I believe that

the perception of gendered language as being so ubiquitous may be a subconscious response from people who believe that drawing attention to and emphasizing as many differences between men and women as possible makes it easier for one sex to oppress the other.

In other words, there exist in every language words or forms or strategies that are used to express certain attitudes, such as aggression or uncertainty. Now, every speaker of every language uses their language in a slightly different way from everyone else around them. This is because everyone is part of a unique set of communities of practice. So, for example, one young person may use an old-fashioned slang word because his parents still use it while his best friend, whose parents do not use that word, might use a foreign slang word for the same thing because his older sister watches foreign television programs and uses it and he looks up to her. While it would be immediately obvious in this case why the two best friends speak so differently in the same context, other differences in the way individual speakers use language, such as one person signaling aggression frequently and another signaling uncertainty just as often, are not so easily explained away. Thus, laymen hypothesize that one speaker uses *zo* because he is a man; they guess that another speaker uses *like* because she is a woman. The reasons behind these word choices are in fact far more complex than that. Many times, one's own gender is not the reason for choosing a word; the first speaker probably chose *zo* because he was angry, not to show that he was a man. Other times, the perception is just plain wrong; *like* is used just as often by men, so it is highly unlikely that anyone is using it to intentionally index femininity. More likely, they are using it for its intended purpose only: as a quotative hedge.

Even though gendered language does exist and the perception of its existence is therefore not incorrect, and even though we have shown that its presence in most aspects of language is not a strong one, I believe that focusing on it too much may actually serve to help normalize



gender inequality in society. The problem is really that too often, qualitative analysis is done through the eyes of researchers looking to find what they expect to find with the result that, if they expect to find gender differences in a certain area, they find gender differences there. Saying that men and women are different without offering any explanation for why that might be the case often comes off as justifying the traditional societal structure in which women were oppressed because they were different from men.

Of course, that of course raises the obvious questions: is this paper also contributing to those harmful stereotypes? In fact, I believe it is, as it is serving to draw more attention to the fact that gender differences do exist in language. And is it safe to assume that this paper is accurate, since it contains no original research to be interpreted or because it acknowledges researcher bias? Of course not. I interpreted the research of other writers through my own lens, and even though I am aware of what I have done, it is impossible to ever be entirely objective when looking at language and society. Everyone who studies it comes to the table with their own background and their own biases in regards to region, class, and of course, gender. I hope though that, despite the flaws in this paper, it has served as an illuminating look at the state of the linguistic study of gender differences in spoken language and in Japanese and English in particular.



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